

The keys to understanding the Israel-Russia relationship

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The world financial crisis, the Iranian crisis and the Georgian crisis illuminate through different prisms the complex relations between Israel and Russia. The seeming contradictions of this odd couple are a constant source of serious concern and perplexity to the Western world, and to NATO in particular, all the more so since Russia sent its army into Georgia and is back on the world stage as an essential player. Why is it that only six weeks after the verbal clash over the Georgian crisis in August 2008 (when Russia accused Israel of having armed and trained the Georgian army), Russia and Israel abolished their visa regulations², thus facilitating reciprocal trade? How do we explain the acceleration of capital flows between the two countries, at a time when world trade is clearly slowing down? And why is it that Moscow, after Washington, is still a destination of choice of Israeli prime ministers, while the Israeli authorities continue to insist that Israel has a special relationship with the United States? Are we to infer from this, then, that Israel and Russia are upgrading their strategic ties, as a popular Turkish magazine suggests³? Lastly, why was Israel one of the very few states in the Middle East to maintain regular relations with Russia after the Cold War, unlike the many Arab states who cold-shouldered their former arms supplier just as it was preparing to deliver sophisticated missile systems to Syria and a nuclear power station to Iran? For many observers, trapped in Cold War thinking, it was impossible to imagine Israel and Russia, the USSR's successor, as anything other than irreconcilable adversaries. This perception of Israel as the West's champion against Soviet-supported Arab countries overlooked the fact that the Arab-Israeli conflict arose from a regional conflict that went way beyond the confines of East-West confrontation. It also failed to take into account the deep and longstanding bonds between Israel and Russia, particularly in the area of immigration.

The answers to all these questions are to be found in history and in the multiple converging interests that have led Israeli and Russian leaders to establish a realistic, pragmatic relationship, regardless of any differences in their views on certain international issues.

The Russian-speaking Israeli community will almost certainly play an important role in the forthcoming general elections in Israel on 10 February 2009, and particularly in the establishment of a likely coalition government. It is clear that whoever of the two main contenders wins the elections will have good reason for maintaining close relations with Russia⁴. Benjamin Netanyahu is surrounded by Russian-speaking oligarchs and politicians who are eager to increase economic

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² Israel and Russia abolished their bilateral visa regulations in September 2008.

³ "Israel, Russia to upgrade strategic ties", *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 9 October 2008.

⁴ The possibility of the elections being won by Ehud Barak, the Labour chairman, is dismissed by all opinion poll institutes.

relations between Israel and their native country. Tzipi Livni holds a number of winning cards that will enable her to get along well with the current Russian leadership. Indeed, the former Mossad agent-turned lawyer-turned politician seems to have real credibility with Vladimir Putin, a former KGB spy, and with Dimitri Medvedev, a former lawyer, like Putin.

The impact of history

The history of the Jewish people has been closely intertwined with that of the Russian people since the Middle Ages. At the end of the 19th century the Jewish population living in the Russian empire (including Poland) was estimated at around six million people, all of Ashkenazi origin. It was by far the main diaspora community. The virulent anti-Semitism that had affected Russia led to numerous pogroms and the first wave of immigration to Palestine. The immigration movement expanded after the birth of the Zionist movement (1896) and then the publication of the "Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion", a highly polemical collection of tracts that were allegedly signed by Jewish dignitaries but in fact had been totally fabricated by Russian nationalists who wanted to pin the blame for the troubles in their country on the Jewish minority. Zionist ideas were very soon adopted by a group of Russian Jewish intellectuals, who advocated a return to the Promised Land and created a Jewish leadership of Russian origin in Palestine. Another group, won over by socialist and Marxist ideas, threw itself headlong into the revolutionary struggle. As a result, many Jews played a key role in the Russian October revolution of 1917⁵. Shortly after coming to power, Stalin fought against their influence and their internationalist vision. Many Jews were eliminated during the Great Purges. Others were deported to the autonomous region of Birobijan on the Chinese border, artificially created in 1934 as a Jewish settlement.

During the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), anti-Semitism died down, and 450,000 Soviet Jews fought in the Red Army⁶. In spring 1945 the Soviet Army liberated most of the Nazi extermination camps, saving many Jews from certain death. When the war ended, the Kremlin supported the founding of an independent Jewish state and set up networks to help young Eastern European Jews to immigrate to Palestine via Iran. In 1947, it voted for Resolution 181, instituting the plan to partition Palestine. The Zionist leaders developed theories that were close to socialism (particularly on the subject of the kibbutzim). At the time Moscow believed that the creation of a Jewish socialist state would weaken the British position in the Middle East, since most of the Arab countries in the region were

monarchies that had special relationships with the British crown and since relations between Israel and the United Kingdom were tense. Many Zionist leaders, including David Ben-Gurion, made repeated overtures to the Soviet Union. In 1948, Golda Meir made a triumphant visit to Moscow. While the Western powers refused to deliver weaponry to Israel, the Soviet Union agreed to send substantial supplies of arms to Israel. This weaponry, most of it shipped through Czechoslovakia, enabled the Israelis to stand up to their adversaries. In many Israeli units at that time, the common language was still Russian.

The "Right of Return" law, enacted on 4 July 1950, encouraged the Jewish diaspora to emigrate to Israel. From then on, relations between Israel and the USSR were permanently based on the question of immigration. Every year for almost forty years, twenty to thirty thousand Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union to the West. Only ten per cent of them were authorized to emigrate to Israel (a quota that was to be the subject of incessant bargaining between Moscow and Tel Aviv). The Kremlin first tried to show consideration to Israel, especially as many Russians had a very low opinion of the Arabs and a number of Soviet intellectuals were sending discreet signals of goodwill to their Israeli interlocutors⁷. They saw Israel as a natural ally. In 1954, in the calmer atmosphere following the death of Stalin, the Kremlin made a last attempt to warm the relationship with Israel, to no avail. Weary of the situation, Moscow eventually sided with Nasser, the prophet of Arab nationalism, who promised to oust the Western powers from the Middle East. Dark clouds began to gather in 1956 during the Suez crisis, but the situation did not really deteriorate until 1964, when Israel opted unequivocally for a durable alliance with Washington⁸. The Kremlin could not tolerate the idea of a strategic partnership between Israel and the world's leading nuclear power. After the war in June 1967 the Soviet Union re-armed the Arab countries and broke off diplomatic relations with Israel. The Kremlin subsequently drew a number of "red lines" in the Middle East that Israel never crossed⁹: not even during the war of attrition (1969-1970), or the Yom Kippur War (October 1973), or the Lebanese war (June 1982). Throughout that time Moscow was careful to maintain the regional status quo, selling arms to Arab states in order to stash away valuable cash.

At the start of the 1980s, tension between Israel and the Soviet Union increased. The Soviet authorities systematically provided assistance to the Palestinian resistance, with the aim of weakening Israel and consequently the US presence in the Middle East, while the Israeli authorities supported the hundreds of thousands of refuzniks who were claiming their right to leave the USSR and return to Israel. Behind the scenes, the secret services

⁵ Notably Kamenev, Zinoviev, Radek or Joffe, and of course Trotsky (real name Lev Bronstein), who was to lay claim to being the potential successor to Lenin.

⁶ Forty per cent of them died during that war. 150 Soviet Jews received the Hero of the Soviet Union award, and one of them (David Dragunsky) became a Lieutenant General – Marianna Belenkaya, "Les Juifs soviétiques dans la guerre" ("Soviet Jews during the war"), RIA Agency – Novosti, 15 May 2005.

⁷ See Arnold Krammer: *The forgotten friendship: Israel and the Soviet bloc, 1947-1953*, University of Illinois Press, United States, 1974.

⁸ Contrary to many preconceived notions, Israel turned to the US not after the June 1967 war, as claimed for a long time by Israeli propagandists, but after Lyndon Johnson was elected President. For a detailed analysis, see Pierre Razoux, *La guerre des Six Jours – Du mythe à la réalité*, Paris, Economica, 2^e édition, 2006.

⁹ The primary red line was the safety of the Arab socialist regimes.

of both countries were stepping up their games of tit for tat. The Israelis arrested Shabtai Kalmanovitch and Abraham Klingberg, two KGB spies, while the Soviets imprisoned Nathan Sharansky on a charge of paving the way for Mossad's operations¹⁰.

With the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev at the Kremlin, relations relaxed and the doors to emigration gradually opened. Israel and the USSR re-established consular relations in 1987. Shortly after, Moscow cut back on its support to the most radical Arab movements and ended its repression of Jewish dissidents. Tel Aviv ceased its criticisms of the Soviet Union and voiced support for Gorbachev's outreach policy. There was no longer any obstacle to diplomatic relations, which resumed with the re-opening of the two embassies in 1991.

Immigration, security, trade and energy: driving forces in the bilateral relationship

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the relationship became simpler. The new Kremlin masters no longer saw Israel as an adversary. On the contrary, they had good reason to regard the Jewish state as a partner, especially as it was no longer setting itself up as a political rival or economic competitor. Israel was, moreover, a regional and nuclear power that Moscow hoped to use as leverage to assert its presence in the region¹¹. From then on, immigration continued to be the most important building block in the bilateral relationship. From 1990 to 1995 more than 800,000 Jews from the former USSR emigrated to Israel, in addition to those who settled in other Western countries. The wave of immigration has stabilized since then, although 7,500 Jews continue to arrive every year from Russia and the CIS member states, representing one third of annual emigration to Israel¹². Today, fifteen per cent of Israeli citizens and ten per cent of Knesset members were born in the former USSR and speak fluent Russian; indeed, certain areas of Israeli cities have become fully-fledged Russian-speaking enclaves where the Cyrillic alphabet has replaced Hebrew and many shops have had to adapt the range of food products on their shelves.

According to a number of Israeli experts, the integration of the Jewish communities from the former USSR (just under a million people) is perceived as "an overall success" and a

"bridge between the two countries"¹³, despite its ups and downs¹⁴, the serious mafia problems it has created, and even though the rabbinate suspect that a significant proportion of Israelis of Soviet origin are not Jewish and have immigrated to Israel only in search of better economic prospects¹⁵. Whatever the truth is, this massive flow of immigrants seems to have given Israel a new injection of vitality. The Russian-born soldiers have integrated by paying "the price of blood" in Lebanon or in the Occupied Territories during the second Intifada. By all accounts, they displayed tremendous fighting spirit during the war in summer 2006 between Israel and the Hezbollah, particularly in the special units. They are the ones, it is said, who have suffered the greatest proportional losses and received the highest number of decorations for valour¹⁶. Today they are estimated as representing almost 25% of combat personnel (appreciably more than the percentage of the population that they comprise). Some of them, Chechnya veterans, have been regrouped in special units of crack marksmen, said to be highly regarded by the Israeli military staff.

In addition to immigration issues, the other factors that have reinforced bilateral cooperation are security concerns and the common fear of radical Islamism. As underlined by Yevgeny Satanovsky, President of the Russian Institute of Middle East Studies: "Israel and Russia have a common enemy in Islamic terrorism."¹⁷ Nearly 20% of the population of the Russia Federation in fact are Muslims, and the Kremlin wants to make sure, no matter what the cost, that this fraction of the population does not come under the influence of radical Islamism, which it believes would seriously destabilize the country. Since the late 1990s, and especially since 11 September 2001, the two capitals have strengthened their ties in the fight against terrorism. This new form of cooperation, which grew from exchanges of information between special services and intelligence agencies, has expanded to include actions of a more operational nature. Russian Special Forces have, it seems, applied the Israeli experience of street fighting during an uprising to their operations in the North Caucasus, while Israeli commandos have benefited from Russian feedback from their experience in Chechnya. Joint exercises are said to take place regularly.¹⁸ Russia is believed to have even sent experts to Israel to assess the feasibility of constructing a concrete wall around Chechnya, inspired by the Israeli Wall around the West Bank¹⁹.

¹⁰ Nathan Sharansky subsequently founded the Zionist Forum of Soviet Union Jews and the *Israel Ba'aliya party* before occupying several ministerial posts in Israel from 1996 to 2006. He has since joined the ranks of Likud.

¹¹ See Shlomo Avineri: *Israel-Russia Relations*, Carnegie Endowment Report, Washington, 2005; but also Mark Smith: *Putin's Middle East Diplomacy*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Russian Series No. 05/27, Camberley, UK, June 2005.

¹² Israel, *Questions internationales* No. 28, December 2007, p. 63. Some of these immigrants have since left Israel for other countries, particularly Canada and the United States. Some have even returned to Russia.

¹³ Interview with Amos Harel, editorialist for the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, 26 May 2008.

¹⁴ Robert Freedman, "Russia and Israel under Yeltsin", *Israel Studies* Volume 3, No. 1, Indiana University Press, Spring 1998, pp. 140-169.

¹⁵ According to the sources and criteria used, 25% to 60% of the Russian-speaking Israeli population are not Jewish. This explains why many immigrants of Soviet origin have been ostracized by certain fringes of the Israeli population and encouraged to settle in the colonies inside the Occupied Territories. Their return to "Israeli" territory would pose problems in domestic politics (particularly for the ultra-orthodox parties, which are very sought after in any coalition government), and would explain the reticence of the Israeli authorities to evacuate some of their colonies in the West Bank (especially the town of Ariel).

¹⁶ Interview with Avi Issacharoff, military specialist for the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, 26 May 2008.

¹⁷ E. Satanovski: "Russia-Israel, les sujets de discussions ne manquent pas", *RIA - Novosti*, 19 April 2005.

¹⁸ "Israel sends experts to Nhelp Russia", *USA Today*, 15 September 2004.

¹⁹ *The Jerusalem Post*, 8 November 2005.

Israelis and Russians also share important commercial interests. Their relations in this area have developed rapidly since the signing of three important agreements during the period 1993-1995²⁰. Today the average volume of trade between the two countries exceeds 1.5 billion dollars and is supervised by an Israel-Russia Economic Council chaired by a Russian-speaking Israeli minister. The number of Russian tourists visiting Israel has doubled every year for the past three years and should reach 250,000 in 2008. Ambitious projects supervised by the Israeli Ministry of Science and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research are in the pipeline, in the areas of nanotechnology, new generation computers and renewable energy sources. Cooperation in space technology is also intense. The Israelis have entrusted the Russians with the launching of several of their satellites²¹ and are planning to set up a joint space committee with them.

To enhance their security and commercial exchanges, Israel and Russia have been engaged in military cooperation under the terms of a special agreement signed in 1995, which led to the establishment of bilateral links between their defence industries. In addition to High Tech (drones, missiles and military electronics), Israeli industrialists have become specialized in the upgrading of earlier Soviet weapon systems (T-72 and T-80 tanks, MiG-21, MiG-29 and Su-25 fighter planes, and Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopters). Israelis and Russians undoubtedly clinched one of their best deals in October 2003, when they signed an agreement for delivery to India of airborne early warning and control radar systems combining Israeli technology with a Russian aircraft platform²². Since then, the Israelis have sold the Russians surveillance drones to help them to monitor Chechnya, identical to the ones they sold to Georgia. These industrial cooperation arrangements helped to make Israel the fourth world exporter of armaments in 2007. The arms sector has established itself as one of the country's principal sources of currency²³.

Since early 2000, the bilateral relationship between Israel and Russia has also been based on energy; before then Israel had diversified its supply sources very carefully²⁴. Subsequently, however, Ariel Sharon's government and then Ehud Olmert's government increased their energy dependence on Moscow. Hydrocarbon fuel deliveries from Russia are believed to represent more than half Israeli gas and oil purchases²⁵. This choice is dictated, it would appear,

by proximity and advantageous prices, as well as by pressure from Russian-speaking Israeli ministers. In 2003, as further enticement for their Israeli partners, the Russians reactivated the Ashkelon-Eilat oil pipeline, which transits through Israel, bypassing the Suez Canal and allowing Russian oil to be exported more rapidly to Asia²⁶. The Israelis receive royalties on the oil transported via this route. Since then, realizing the risks of energy dependence on Russia, in an attempt to diversify their oil supplies the Israeli authorities have taken an interest in the famous Bakou-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. Privately, a number of Israeli officials admit that from now on they want to procure their oil and gas supplies from Azerbaijan. It is no coincidence that these last years they have stepped up every form of cooperation with Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan (the three countries crossed by the new strategic oil pipeline). This makes it easier to understand Moscow's hostility towards Jerusalem during the Georgian crisis last August.

In order to not to offend Russia and to give substance to its alliance with Turkey, Israel also participated in the "Blue Stream" project, a gigantic undersea gas pipeline that will transport 16 billion cubic metres per year of Russian-produced natural gas to Turkey (by 2010). The Israeli government is currently engaged in negotiations with Turkey and Russia for an undersea extension of this gas pipeline to Israel²⁷. The Israelis are also holding parallel talks with Ankara on a proposal to construct an undersea oil pipeline which would connect the Turkish oil terminal at Ceyhan to the port of Haifa and would allow direct transport to Israel of oil transiting through the BTC. However, it appears that they have renounced the portion of the Blue Stream project envisaging construction of an undersea aqueduct to carry soft water from Turkey to Israel, because it would be too costly²⁸.

Capacity to inflict mutual harm

Israel and Russia's converging interests do not prevent friction between them in both foreign and domestic policy. The Israeli authorities still suspect the Kremlin of maintaining trading relations that run counter to Israeli security interests. For a long time, in fact, the USSR supplied arms to regimes that were the most hostile to Jerusalem. Today Russia

²⁰ A civilian air transport agreement (23 September 1993), a trading and economic cooperation agreement (27 April 1994) and a telecommunications agreement (21 November 1995).

²¹ The Israeli AMOS-3 communications satellite was launched into orbit on 30 April 2008 by a Russian Zenit launcher from the Baikonur site launch site.

²² Israel and Russia have excellent commercial and military relations with India and China, whom they regard as special partners.

²³ Lettre d'informations stratégiques *TTU Monde arabe* no. 546, 31 January 2008. For a detailed analysis of the impact of the military-industrial complex on Israeli society, see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, London, Penguin Books, 2007, pp. 423-442.

²⁴ Israel used to carefully diversify its sources of energy supply, buying its oil and gas from countries like Norway, Venezuela, Mexico, Nigeria, Gabon and Egypt.

²⁵ A peak, it seems, was reached in 2006, with 88% of oil deliveries coming from Russia and the CIS (Ilya Bourtman, "Putin and Russia's Middle Eastern Policy", *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Volume 10, No. 2, June 2006).

²⁶ This oil pipeline, the result of Israeli-Iranian cooperation (the Eilat-Ashkelon Pipeline Company), was no longer in operation after the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979.

²⁷ Gazprom allegedly confirmed to the Israeli Minister of Infrastructure, who visited Moscow on 23 June 2008, that it intended to deliver large quantities of gas to Israel via the Blue Stream (*Guysen Israel News*, 24 June 2008).

²⁸ In an interview with the author on 30 May 2008, Amikam Nachmani, a specialist in Israel-Turkey relations, stressed that Israel now prefers the sea water desalination project, which is judged far less costly than transport of soft water from Turkey.

continues to arm Syria and other Arab countries that have not recognized Israel²⁹ and is participating in the construction of the nuclear reactor at Bushehr in Iran, which has enough fissile material to produce a nuclear weapon. The Kremlin, which is a member of the Quartet (with the US, the UN & the EU) and co-sponsor of the peace process, firmly supports the Palestinian Authority and does not shrink from holding talks with Hamas, arousing the ire of the Israeli government. It is clear from this that the influence of Yevgeny Primakov, an eminent Orientalist who has had a distinguished career in government³⁰, is still making itself felt in Russian embassies in the Middle East.

Moscow, in turn, is irritated by the Israeli government's systematic alignment with US policy in the Middle East, which is preventing Russia from becoming more involved in the region. Above all, the Kremlin cannot bear the fact that Israel has close relations with countries trying to break free of Russian influence, such as Ukraine and Georgia, both candidates for NATO membership. The Israeli government has in fact embarked on an important economic partnership with Ukraine and significant military cooperation with Georgia. In 2000, the Israeli air company IAI formed an ambitious partnership with the Georgian company TAM with a view to modernizing the Su-25 fighter-bombers produced during the Soviet era in a Tbilisi aviation factory. The new version, named "Skorpion" and delivered as a priority to the Georgian air force, has since then been sold to several other countries. Jerusalem and Tbilisi immediately signed a military cooperation agreement on the training of Georgian soldiers by Israeli instructors (via private security consultancy companies), and delivery of equipment worth almost 300 million dollars³¹. In summer 2008 the Georgian Interior Minister, Temur Yakobashvili, was known to be engaged in close relations with Jerusalem, while the Defence Minister (David Kezerashvili) had spent part of his childhood in Israel. This evident collusion prompted Russian general Anatoly Nogovitsine, Deputy Chief of the General Staff, to comment: "Israel is one of the countries that have given most assistance to Georgia in the conflict with Russia."³²

On the domestic front, Jerusalem and Moscow are courting the Russian-speaking Jewish communities, because of their electoral weight (in Israel) and their political and economic influence (in Russia)³³. In Russia, the Jewish community is well assimilated, with a third estimated as living in the Moscow area. It has gradually split into three branches³⁴,

leading to rivalry between Progressives and the ultra-Orthodox Lubavitch movement. The Lubavitchers are attracting an increasing number of Russian Jews by financing free social welfare centres and distributing thousands of meals every day to the poorest members of the Jewish community. The Kremlin is exploiting the split to win over the community (Vladimir Putin makes regular visits to Jewish cultural associations in Moscow), and also to create divisions within the community and increase Russian control over it by marginalizing some of its leaders, whose personal interests are opposed to those of the Russian ruling elite. The press magnate Vladimir Gussinsky found refuge in Israel after openly contesting Putin's media control policy. Boris Berezovsky fled to the UK. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was tempted to go into politics after making a fortune at the head of the Yukos oil company, was arrested, tried and jailed before he could immigrate to Israel.

Conversely, Dimitri Medvedev and Vladimir Putin take a very conciliatory attitude to those who are loyal to them, such as Berl Lazar, the Lubavitcher Chief Rabbi who heads the Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia, has powerful contacts in the US and is close to Roman Abramovitch, an oligarch highly regarded by the Kremlin. By supporting the Lubavitcher movement, which is very influential in the United States, the Russian political elite are killing two birds with one stone, since they also receive support from the powerful Orthodox community in the US, which is always ready to put pressure on the White House and the Israeli government.

In Israel, successive Prime Ministers have fully recognized the clout wielded by the Russian-speaking community and its impact on the precarious equilibrium of a complex and traditionally fragmented political situation. Experience has clearly shown how volatile this predominantly right-wing electorate can be. The way it votes is conditioned by the Russian-speaking community's interests and can swing the elections either one way or another. That is why they are so careful not to offend Avigdor Lieberman, the former Minister of Strategic Affairs from 2006 to 2008 and leader of the *Israel Beitenou* "Russian" party, which has 12 key votes in the Knesset. A constant in the Israeli Russian-speaking electorate is its support for the policies of Vladimir Putin, as repeatedly stressed by Arkady Gaydamak, the oligarch who founded the "Social Justice" party and is running for mayor of Jerusalem³⁵. The Israeli government knows, therefore, that it would be risky to be too openly critical of Putin's policies. On the other hand, it knows that the numerous oligarchs who

²⁹ In 2005 Russia signed a huge eight-billion dollar arms contract with Algeria.

³⁰ The pro-Arab Yevgeni Primakov was ambassador to several Arab countries, then a KGB boss, then Foreign Affairs Minister, then Prime Minister to President Yeltsin.

³¹ Noah Shachtman, "How Israel trained and equipped Georgia's Army", 19/08/2008 (<http://blog.wired.com/defense/2008/08/did-israel-trai.html>). According to the Russian site *Moscow Defense Brief* (www.mdb.cast.ru), which is always very well informed, Israel delivered to the Georgian Army 23 drones (18 Skylark and 5 Hermes 450), 8 GRAD rocket-launchers and several mine clearance systems, and upgraded several dozen of its T-72 tanks.

³² *Guysen Israel News*, 19 August 2008.

³³ According to the sources consulted, the number of Jews living in Russia is between 230,000 and 1 million (Arnaud Kalika, *L'Empire aliéné – Le système du pouvoir russe*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2008, pp. 118-119). In the autonomous region of Birobijan, there are now only 6,000 Jews out of a total population of 300,000 habitants.

³⁴ The Orthodox branch (in a slight majority), the Progressive branch (very popular with young people) and the ultra-conservative branch (in a minority), comprising the famous Lubavitchers, whose name commemorates the ultra-Orthodox movement that began in the town of Lubavitch, not far from the present Belarussian boundary, in the late 17th century.

³⁵ Interview given by Arkady Gaydamak to Gilles William Goldnadel, *Politique Internationale* No. 117, Autumn 2007, pp. 331-340.

have sought refuge in Israel or have an Israeli passport can be used as a powerful lever to influence Russian financial and political life³⁶. The Israeli authorities are nevertheless aware of the dangers of this double-edged weapon, since it is abundantly clear that most oligarchs have at the very least suspicious links with the increasingly powerful organized crime networks in Israel. They have no compunction about arms trafficking and brazenly supply terrorist organizations of every colour.

The Israeli government has one more type of leverage to use over Russian authorities: media coverage of the anti-Semitism that is never far from the surface in Russia. According to a survey by the Moscow *Expertisa* agency published on 16 March 2005, two thirds of the Russian population hold nationalist and xenophobic opinions. Forty per cent of the persons questioned, annoyed by the power many oligarchs have, think that Jewish influence on public life should be curbed. Another blatant sign of this is the increase of Russian anti-Semitic sites on the Internet. In Moscow there have been several attacks over the last few years on synagogues and Israeli diplomats. Every time a serious incident occurs, the Israeli authorities put pressure on the Kremlin and threaten to alert international public opinion. On each occasion Vladimir Putin condemns the anti-Semitic attacks and takes steps to resolve the issue. As a token of goodwill to the Jewish community, in 2007 he lost no time in appointing Mikhail Fradkov, former Prime Minister (2004-2007), who makes no secret of his Jewish origins, to the greatly coveted position as leader of the Russian Federation's Foreign Intelligence Service. It is a *modus vivendi* that seems to work, since the foreign media only rarely report these anti-Semitic incidents, preferring instead to highlight incidents that are far less frequent but affect certain Western countries that have complex relations with Israel.

On the whole, the balance of power today seems to be tilted in favour of Russia, as it has more ways to exert pressure on Israel. Israel has fewer means at its disposal to pressure Moscow, especially now that the general elections are in sight.

A necessarily pragmatic relationship

Israel and Russia face the same dilemma: how to promote their trading interests, be they arms sales or energy contracts, without harming the "other side's" political and security interests. There is an easy answer to this: by constantly seeking consensus and by avoiding dogmatic discussions of any kind. As Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, constantly reiterates: "Russian policy is neither pro-Arab nor pro-Israeli. It is aimed at securing Russian national interests. Maintaining close and

friendly ties with Arab states and Israel is among them."³⁷ As a clear demonstration of this pragmatic relationship, Vladimir Putin visited Israel from 27 to 29 April 2005. This first state visit by a Russian president, described as historic, was a genuine test of the compatibility of the two governments' agendas, and enabled Vladimir Putin to dispel the Israeli authorities' fears about Russian intentions in the region³⁸. Ariel Sharon went to Moscow on several occasions to reaffirm his determination to deepen bilateral relations and show his sincere respect for Vladimir Putin. Putin, like Sharon, is adept in the use of strong arm tactics to tackle the security challenges confronting both states, although it is true that he also had to provide guarantees to the Russian-speaking parties who played a pivotal role in his shaky coalition.

In 2006 the two countries celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of the re-opening of their embassies with great pomp and ceremony. Israel also promised to hand back to the Russian government the sumptuous property (known in Jerusalem as Sergei's Court) that had been made available to the Soviet government before the break-off of diplomatic relations in 1967. It was in this positive spirit, buoyed by expanding bilateral exchanges, that both countries abolished their reciprocal visa arrangements in order to facilitate exchanges.

This pragmatism did not prevent either of the capitals from occasionally adopting a tougher attitude, as we saw during the recent Georgian crisis, which highlighted Israel's "flexibility" with regard to Russia and its ability to decide where its priorities lie. By late 2007, foreseeing an imminent conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi, Israel had reduced its military cooperation with Georgia, just as Israeli industrialists were putting pressure on the government to step up its arms sales to Tbilisi³⁹. Tension worsened on 20 April 2008 when a Georgian reconnaissance drone delivered by Israel was shot down over Abkhazia. On 5 August 2008 the Israeli government, afraid of finding itself in an awkward position with Russia, openly announced its decision to end its military cooperation with Georgia, thus sending a very clear signal to Moscow⁴⁰. Israel foresaw the imminent battle between Georgia and Russia whereas the US and NATO were apparently caught by surprise. Three days later, the Georgian army launched its offensive against South Ossetia, igniting the latent conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi. From the start of hostilities the Israeli government, which had endured harsh criticism from the Russian authorities for its part in the training and equipment of the Georgian army, used all its powers of diplomacy to placate the Kremlin and stop it from taking reprisals against Israel. Tzipi Livni, backed by Ehud Olmert, advised Ehud Barak that it was in Israel's national interests to refrain in future from delivering "offensive" military equipment. According to

³⁶ In addition to the oligarchs already cited, Viktor Vekselberg and Leonid Nevzlin can also be mentioned. See the article by Arnaud Kalika: "Poutine, les oligarques et le pouvoir en Russie", *Politique Etrangère*, IFRI, 1/2004.

³⁷ Interviewed by Sergey Borisov, "Russia and Israel to join forces in anti-terrorist cooperation", *Pravda*, 7 September 2004. See also Yuri Rubinski, "La politique extérieure de la Russie : l'obsession du pragmatisme", *Géopolitique* No. 86, April-June 2004, pp. 31-40.

³⁸ The Russian president's visit took on an unexpected religious dimension when he went to the Holy Sepulchre to emphasize Russia's vocation as "defender of Orthodox Christianity", as subsequently reported in the Russian newspapers *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Kommersant* (30 April 2005).

³⁹ Amos Harel, "Israel predicted Georgia and Russia headed for war in 2007", *Haaretz*, 14 August 2008.

⁴⁰ *Guysen Israel News*, 6 August 2008.

an Israeli government source, "Israel needs to be very careful and sensitive these days. The Russians are selling many arms to Iran and Syria and there is no need to offer them an excuse to sell even more advanced weapons."⁴¹ At the same time Jerusalem set up a humanitarian airlift with Georgia, evacuating several hundred Georgian Jews to Israel. Tzipi Livni made an urgent trip to Moscow to pour oil on troubled waters. Ehud Olmert telephoned the new Russian president Dimitri Medvedev to iron out the problems between Jerusalem and Moscow and ensure that Israel's strategic interests would not be called into question by the Kremlin. He even paid him a visit on 7 October for a face-to-face discussion of the situation developing in the region. Russia is equally capable of taking a pragmatic approach in order to save its relationship with Israel. To please the Israeli government, the Kremlin decided to forego delivery to Syria and Iran of new generation missiles, particularly the famous S-300 (SA-20), regarded as excellent anti-aircraft missiles able to threaten Israeli air superiority⁴². It also slowed down its nuclear cooperation with Iran, staggering its deliveries of enriched uranium and nuclear components that would enable the Iranian nuclear station at Bushehr on the shores of the Persian Gulf to start operation. The Russian authorities themselves, however, believe that this station, which is under IAEA control, should not be operational until the end of March 2009 at the earliest, several years later than stated in the initial terms of the contract⁴³. As Sergei Lavrov continues to emphasize to his Western and Israeli interlocutors, Moscow "is committed to preventing Iran from acquiring a military nuclear capability."⁴⁴ In a similar vein, he recently proposed that Russia should contribute to the indirect peace negotiations between Israel and Syria, because of its close relations with both players. Both sides seek indeed to nurture areas of mutually over-lapping self-interest and in so far as possible to ignore areas of disagreement wherever possible, for as long as possible.

The Iranian crisis: the next test for the bilateral relationship

Despite the apparent complicity between Jerusalem and Moscow on a number of issues, the Iranian nuclear crisis is still a real cause of friction between Israel and Russia. There is no doubt that the outcome of this crisis, which calls into question the nuclear balance of power that prevailed until recently in the Middle East, will be a test for the future of relations between the two countries.

Up to now, Russia has adapted to Israel's status as unofficial

nuclear power. The Kremlin has pursued a policy of preventing nuclear proliferation, both civil and military, at all costs, particularly in a region as unstable as the Middle East. Like their US counterparts, the Russian leaders thought it was important to minimize the risks of nuclear proliferation spinning out of control and escalating into a crisis. This approach went down well with successive Israeli governments, as one of their priorities had always been to prevent the installation of competing nuclear arsenals in the Middle East, in order to safeguard Israeli monopoly in the area and increase the effectiveness of their deterrence strategy.

The Russian government now seems to be moving away from this policy and allowing a certain kind of nuclear proliferation through specific cooperation with several states in the region. The Kremlin signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with Egypt, at the time of President Mubarak's visit to Moscow on 24 March 2008, and it is currently engaged in an advanced stage of talks with Qatar⁴⁵. What is more serious, from Jerusalem's perspective, is that the Kremlin is pursuing its cooperation with Iran and reaffirming Tehran's right to nuclear energy. This attitude has aroused much criticism in Israel, where some academics have been quick to denounce Moscow's double game and to conclude that the relationship with Russia is just a fool's game⁴⁶. They are, however, in a minority. On the whole, Israelis continue to see a large number of advantages in a close relationship with Russia, even if they very much doubt the Kremlin's real ability to stop Iran from developing a military nuclear programme. They are afraid that Iran could have an atomic bomb and that if it happens, this will encourage other Arab states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia to do everything possible to acquire their own nuclear capabilities. This is why the Israeli authorities are seriously envisaging military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. This assumption seems to have consensus in Israel, even though no decisions can be made until a new leadership is elected. This explains the importance of the outcome of the next general elections and the impact of the Russian-speaking community's vote on it. Whereas Tzipi Livni seems to prefer to negotiate with Iran, at least in an initial phase, in the belief that the engagement of Russia and the United States in this process could help resolve the crisis, Benjamin Netanyahu has never concealed the fact that he would consider recourse to the military option⁴⁷. If this were to occur, how would the Russian authorities react to the probable bombing of the Bushehr nuclear station, where a large number of Russian technicians are permanently employed, when they are allegedly discussing the possibility of constructing

⁴¹ Barak Ravid & Amos Harel, "Russia declares itself ready to make peace with Georgia", *Haaretz*, 11 August 2008.

⁴² *Guysen Israel News*, 10 October 2008.

⁴³ Itay Smadja, "Nucléaire iranien: la Russie souffle le chaud et le froid", *Guysen Israel News*, 19 October 2008.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Gulf in the Media*, 22 October 2008.

⁴⁶ Efraim Inbar, "Invading Georgia: The Opening Shot in a Grand Russian Strategy to Challenge the West Through the Domination of the Energy Market", *BESA Center Perspectives Papers* No. 49, September 2008; Alek Epstein, "Russia and Israel: A Romance aborted?", *Russia in Global Affairs* No. 4, October-December 2007.

⁴⁷ However, recent statements by US General John Abizaid, former commander of the US Central Command, overseeing the Middle East, raised doubts whether "the Israelis have the capability to make a lasting impression on the Iranian nuclear program with their military capabilities", implying that an effective attack could only be envisaged in close concert with the US armed forces (Dan Ephron, "Iran Nukes: Out of Reach", *Newsweek*, 29 September 2008).

another nuclear power station in Iran? What would they do to avoid losing face, given that prestige is so important to them? And how would they react to pressure from their Arab customers to punish the Israelis for their attack?

The implications for the West and NATO

On balance, the rapprochement between Israel and Russia is real, but it needs to be seen in perspective and must not be overestimated. Each side is convinced of the usefulness of an uninhibited and ambitious partnership that is leading to excellent results, but at the same time is aware of its limitations: the context is that of a pragmatic relationship between good neighbours, rather than a sincere friendship based on shared values and proven trustworthiness. In answer to one of the first questions asked in this paper, it is most certainly an exaggeration to talk of enhanced strategic ties between Israel and Russia. The special relationship between the USA and Israel still has a good future, as demonstrated by the recent promise to sell 75 F-35 stealth bombers to the Israeli air force⁴⁸ and the American radar station being installed in the Negev desert to reinforce Israeli defences against potential ballistic missile attacks by Iran or Syria⁴⁹. There is no reason for special relationship to be reappraised in the foreseeable future, whatever the composition of the new American administration, unless there is a brutal radicalisation of Israeli policy after the next general elections in February 2009. Equally, there seems to be no reason for the Israelis to question their relationships with European countries, or with NATO, an organization they increasingly perceive as a purveyor of security in the Mediterranean.

NATO member countries must not, however, be alarmed by Israel's relations with the Kremlin. These relations have no "hidden agenda" other than the pragmatic desire to cultivate good relations with Moscow, like the majority of European states, and to avoid an exacerbation of tensions that would be of little benefit to anyone and of great detriment to everyone. There is no point in deluding ourselves that Israel might break off its links with Russia in the name of the new "Cold War" that some politicians on both sides of the Atlantic seem to be hoping for. Israel has clearly stated its willingness to maintain excellent relations both with Washington and with Moscow. Despite repeated requests from the American administration, the Israeli government

has refused to freeze its negotiations with Syria following Bashar el-Assad's friendly talks in Moscow with Dimitri Medvedev and Vladimir Putin only a few days after Russia's military intervention in Georgia⁵⁰. It would also certainly have refused to sever its ties with Russia if Washington had asked it to. Faced with a situation that is totally new for Western countries, which tend to consider the Jewish state as their bridgehead in the Middle East, the Israelis are discovering that they could be a "bridge" between Americans and Russians. Would this not be in the interest of NATO member countries, at a time when the Russian fleet is preparing to intensify its presence in the Mediterranean⁵¹ ?

One thing seems certain: thanks to its newly regained stature, energy resources, and good relations with Israel and a number of Arab countries, Russia seems determined to play an important role once again, in the Mediterranean and also in the Persian Gulf, as demonstrated by its recent political initiatives in the Middle East. This has three consequences. First, NATO must not ignore the "Russian" factor when defining its future cooperation with Maghreb, Mashrek, Gulf and EU countries in the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue or the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, especially when its southern Mediterranean partners, annoyed at seeing the Alliance focus primarily on Gulf security, are questioning the future and relevance of the Mediterranean Dialogue. And, since nature abhors a vacuum, these countries could be tempted to turn once again, albeit momentarily, to a Russia perceived as triumphant and self-assured. As numerous Arab intellectuals stress, there are two aspects of post-communist Russia that attract and reassure Muslim societies: lack of any ideology and lack of a colonial past in the Middle East.

Second, Americans and the Europeans can hardly afford, surely, not to have an energy security debate in a NATO or European Union framework, or in the context of NATO-UE relations. Third, since Moscow is now able to exert real pressure on Jerusalem, it is quite conceivable that the US and Russia might exert joint pressure on Israel, in the event of a radical right-wing coalition being formed, to persuade it to be more flexible on certain crucial issues, such as the settlement of the Palestinian issue or the Iranian nuclear crisis. It is thus possible to imagine that American and Russian leaderships, each for different reasons, might exert joint pressure on Israel to prevent it from conducting military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. A development of this kind could be the precursor of revolutionary change in the Middle East.

⁴⁸ *Defense News*, 30 September 2008. This AN/TPY-2 station will be operated by 120 US soldiers based permanently in Israel.

⁴⁹ Alon Ben-David, "Israeli missile defence receives US radar boost", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 8 October 2008.

⁵⁰ *Guyesen Israel News*, 24 August 2008.

⁵¹ The Kremlin has allegedly proposed to Damascus that it will cancel 70% of Syria's debt in exchange for a naval base at Tartus (Lettre d'informations stratégiques *TTU Monde arabe* No. 526, 6 September 2007). Recently, it appears, after Colonel Khadafi's visit to Moscow, the Russian authorities negotiated authorization for their ships to call at Libyan ports (*Emirates Business* 24/7, 5 November 2008).